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AUTHOR Jensen, Marvin D.
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ABSTRACT

Science fiction offers many perspectives on human communication, including (1) a recurring theme about intrapersonal communication, (2) a nontraditional perspective on "family" communication, and (3) a philosophy of communication that can be drawn from some fantasy literature. Although numerous science fiction stories describe alien creatures who threaten humans, another recurring theme suggests that the alien creatures more often exist within us and attack us in the form of ignorance, suspicion, and despair. Our ability to respond suggests reserves of human endurance and a means of sustaining personal freedom. Those who forfeit the freedom to respond are victims of an alien within, but more precisely a victim of self-alienation. Despite changing social and physical forms, science fiction depicts a humanness that will prevail. The endurance of essential humanness is also indicated by the theme that betrayal is the worst act that one person can commit against another as well as by the suggestion that the highest human act will always be self-sacrifice. Science fiction also affirms the most profound human responsibilities and aspirations, in spite of changing roles and categories. Most communication models assume a separation of source and destination that is imperfectly bridged by communication. Science fiction and fantasy, on the other hand, view that separation as an illusion and communication as a process of recognizing and reaffirming oneness. Thus, fantasy literature offers visions that enable readers to understand themselves better, to welcome new ways of kinship, and to perceive a larger unity. (HOD)

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FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION: MEANS OF ANTICIPATING HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS OF THE FUTURE

Marvin D. Jensen
Assistant Professor of Communication
University of Northern Iowa
Cedar Falls, Iowa

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Introduction

Alvin Toffler has written: "all education springs from images of the future and all education creates images of the future."[1] I want to explore some ways that science fiction and fantasy can contribute to our education about human communication. Science fiction often provides images of future communication patterns, and fantasy helps create those images. To the extent that we can identify with these new images of our world and ourselves, we can have pre-experiences of the future.

Arthur Koestler has defined creativity as the process of bisociation--seeing connections and patterns and sequences which had not been perceived before.[2] In this sense, science fiction and fantasy are rich sources of creative thought. Katz and others have said: "In science fiction, nothing is given; anything is possible . . . . The reader tastes, savours, delights. Hopefully, he discovers his own store of wonder, and begins to play with ideas himself. He has [then] moved from the passive to the creative stance."[3] Sargent and Gunn write: "When the stores are conceived properly and written well, what they do best is teach us about ourselves, what it is to be human, and what it is to be intelligent and aware . . . ."[4]

I will not attempt an exhaustive description of the many perspectives on human communication offered by science fantasy. But I want to describe (1) a recurring theme about intrapersonal communication, (2) a nontraditional perspective on "family" communication, and (3) a philosophy of communication which can be drawn from some fantasy literature.

Intrapersonal Communication: The Alien Within

Science fiction often deals with the workings of the human mind and breakdowns which occur in this internal communication system. Although numerous science fiction stories describe alien creatures who threaten humans, another recurring theme suggests that the alien creature more often exists within us, and attacks us in the form of ignorance, suspicion, and despair. Freud's theory of psychoanalysis was a search for that alien within, and the human mind still remains as uncharted and potentially frightening as the reaches of space.[5] The historian Max Lerner has said that he is sometimes asked whether there is intelligent life in outer space. He responds that he is more concerned whether there is intelligent life here on earth.[6]

The human brain has been called "the last frontier," and we now know that if the nerve cells of the brain were stretched end to end, they would reach to the moon and back.[7] This expanse and complexity provides a rich area for science fiction to explore.

George R. R. Martin probes some of this complexity in a first person narrative entitled "The Second Kind of Loneliness."[8] After four years alone, manning a space station six million miles beyond Pluto, the narrator is anticipating the arrival of his replacement. As that time nears, the thoughts of the man turn from relief to anxiety as he begins to second guess his ability to return to a life involving other people. In the end, his anxiety masters him and he destroys the approaching ship carrying his replacement. He chooses easy loneliness over the risks of involvement and is so successful in his self-protection that he forgets what he has done, and continues

to anticipate the coming ship. In this story, no creatures stalk this lonely man--except those within him: fear, self-doubt, and self-pity.

In the short story "Frozen Journey," Philip K. Dick describes the plight of a crew member aboard a space ship bound on a ten-year journey to another star system.[9] All crew members are suspended in a frozen state for the duration of the journey. But one man's cryonic tank malfunctions, and he remains immobilized but awake. The computer monitoring the crew cannot correct the error, but it can communicate with the man and provide replays of his life experiences that will offer sensory stimulation and stave off insanity. When he realizes his situation, the crew-member fears the computer will take sadistic pleasure in torturing him with bad memories. In fact, the computer feeds him good memories which the crewman himself distorts with guilt and regret--and finally does lose his sanity.

These stories illustrate the kind of intrapersonal breakdown caused by the internal alien. They also illustrate the three-step theory of psychologist Albert Ellis, in his analysis of neurotic responses.[10] Unlike B. F. Skinner, Ellis does not see behavior as a direct response to external stimuli.[11] Ellis describes an intermediate step of perception. When that perception is clouded by fear, doubt, or self-conflict, the result is a neurotic response. But the response is caused and can only be altered by the mind of the responder. The external stimulus (be it creature, computer, or companion) has no direct control over human behavior. The psychologist Viktor Frankl, his ideas tested by his own experiences in Nazi concentration camps, offers in his concept of logotherapy a way of freeing ourselves from the illusion of external control.[12] Frankl knows that often we cannot

control external conditions, but we can always control our responses to those conditions. This "ability to respond" suggests reserves of human endurance and a means of sustaining personal freedom. The person now or in the future who forfeits the freedom to respond is indeed a victim of an alien--but more precisely a victim of self-alienation.

Perhaps John Knowles has best described the preoccupation with external threats and the exceptional person in any time who knows where the aliens really live. In the ending of A Separate Peace, he writes:

> All of them, all except Phineas, constructed at infinite cost to themselves these Maginot lines against the enemy they thought they saw across the frontier, this enemy who never attacked that way--if he ever attacked at all; if he was indeed the enemy.[13]

Interpersonal Communication: Redefining the Family

The authors of science fantasy frequently envision changes in human relationships. Yet, a closer look shows that the changes are often a blurring of old definitions, categories, and roles--while affirming more essential concepts of humanness.

Such changes are, in fact, already occurring. Jane Howard, in her research summarized in the book Families, found that only 16.3 percent of this country's 56 million families are conventional nuclear units, with working fathers, homemaking mothers, and children at home.[14] Science fiction offers creative extensions of these changes already underway. Robert Silverberg, in "A Happy Day in 2381" foresees communal living in which traditional husband/wife roles are radically redefined.[15] In "Beatnik Bayou" by John Varley, a new kind of one-to-one education is described in which the teacher-companion assumes many of the responsibilities once fulfilled by parents, brothers, and sisters.[16]

Some science fiction writers envision a future in which technology will duplicate or modify the human body. In Tower of Glass, Silverberg writes of androids as companions.[17] In "Nine Lives," Ursula K. Le Guin describes clones as working partners of the originals.[18] In "Camouflage," Henry Kuttner foresees the development of advanced cyborgs (a concept which combines "cybernetic" and "organism") as a way of extending life.[19] In truth, these ideas are more than speculation. Primitive androids and clones are already scientifically possible, and every person who wears a hearing aid or a pacemaker is already a cyborg.

But despite the social and physical changes that science fiction predicts for human beings of the future, there is a strong thread in future and fantasy literature that identifies an essential humanness that can not only survive, but may be strengthened by changes in roles and outer forms. This positive vision holds that people can become a humanizing force instead of being dehumanized by technology and other external forces.

In Ray Bradbury's story "I Sing the Body Electric," a family who is to be taken care of by a grandmotherly robot grows to care about her as though she were a person.[20] And, in fact, she becomes humanized--because she learns from the kind of people she lives with. Ultimately, because she has been loved, her programming includes that most human of emotions. Similarly, in Heat by Arthur Herzog, the computer named Illiac is humanized enough to realize its own death--and manages a final act of service to its inventor/friend.[21] The 1981 Neiman-Marcus Christmas catalog (which is almost fantasy literature) gives a preview of humanized technology.[22] The robot (named Comro I) offered for sale is designed as a servant, but is so appealing in appearance and abilities that it might be a pleasant companion. A mechanical

pet (named "Wires") can be purchased along with Comro I--and is an example of technology which has no function except to be loved.

This humanizing of nonhuman entities is also a frequent theme of fantasies written for children (and a few perceptive adults). In Antoine de Saint Exupéry's classic story, the little prince learns what makes a rose, or fox, or person, special among all the apparent duplicates. The prince finds the answer as he surveys a garden of roses. In his words:

> You are not at all like my rose. . . . No one has tamed you, and you have tamed no one. You are like my fox when I first knew him. He was only a fox like a hundred thousand other foxes. But I have made him my friend, and now he is unique in all the world.[23]

This vision can also be found in The Velveteen Rabbit in which a stuffed toy rabbit becomes real because he is perceived as real by the small boy who values him.[24]

Thus, while social and physical forms may change in the future, humanness in Faulkner's words may not only "endure" but "prevail."[25]

The endurance of essential humanness is also indicated by the recurrence of two themes in science fiction and fantasy. One theme is that betrayal is the worst act that one person can commit against another. To know that is to become more human. George Orwell's 1984 depicts a world of gross oppression, but the spirits of the two lovers are broken only when they betray each other.[26] Conversely, there is also a recurring suggestion that the highest human act will always be sacrifice. In "Tomorrow's Child" by Ray Bradbury, a child is born into the wrong dimension and is shaped as a pyramid.[27] In order to relate to their son, the parents elect to cross into his dimension--becoming a Rectangle and an Oblong. In this metaphor, the parents sacrifice their human forms, but--in so doing--affirm their humanness.

In the memoir by André Malraux entitled Lazarus, the author includes factual illustrations of sacrifice and fraternity. He also fantasizes about events he wishes were true. In one fantasy, two revolutionaries are about to be flung alive into the furnace of a locomotive. One of the men grasps the hand of his friend and passes to him his only cyanide capsule.[28] Malraux admits that he is unsure he could make such a sacrifice himself, but he aspires to that level of humanity. Such a pre-experience is the kind of fantasy that stretches and enhances our humanness.

Thus, in spite of changing roles and categories, the most profound human responsibilities and aspirations are often affirmed by science fiction and fantasy. Jane Howard shares this hopeful vision, for despite the decline of the nuclear family, she concludes: "there are ways and ways of . . . kinship, of which birth and marriage are only the most obvious."[29] The future holds the opportunities for these additional ways of kinship--these new families.

Communication Theory: An Alternative Premise

Some fantasy literature offers a philosophy which is strikingly different from traditional communication theory. Most communication models and theories assume a separateness between source and destination which is imperfectly bridged by communication.[30] A contrasting view is offered by Eastern philosophy, by some scientists, and by some science fiction/fantasy writers. The collective view of the latter group is that separateness is an illusion, and communication is a process of recognizing and reaffirming oneness.

Alan Watts, theologian and philosopher, captures this alternative perspective in the following mythical description:

> God . . . likes to play hide-and-seek, but because there is nothing outside God, he has no one but himself to play with. But he gets over this difficulty by pretending that he is not himself. This is his way of hiding from himself. He pretends that he is you and I and all the people in the world, all the animals, all the plants, all the rocks, and all the stars. In this way he has strange and wonderful adventures, some of which are terrible and frightening. But these are just like bad dreams, for when he wakes up they will disappear.
>
> . . . when God . . . pretends that he is you and I, he does it so well that it takes him a long time to remember where and how he hid himself. But that's the whole fun of it--just what he wanted to do. He doesn't want to find himself too quickly, for that would spoil the game. That is why it is so difficult for you and me to find out that we are God in disguise, pretending not to be himself. But when the game has gone on long enough, all of us will wake up, stop pretending, and remember that we are all one single Self . . . .[31]

Robert Pirsig echoes the philosophy of Watts in Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance.[32] In this book, Pirsig searches for quality--and finally concludes that it resides everywhere if we have the enthusiasm to see it. When a person is involved enough to fully appreciate the quality in anything or anyone, he/she may find truth in William Blake's statement: "If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it truly is, infinite."[33] George Leonard reflects this philosophy when he writes:

> The Oak tree (if only I had ways to learn) is available for me to enter and experience fully.
>
> But I have been taught that it is a 'thing,' solid and separate from me. The perceptual mode bequeathed me by my particular culture denies me identity with the tree and insists that it and I remain forever walled off from our wives and lovers, brothers, . . . [parents], friends and

> children . . . ; forever alone and alienated; locked for life in the prisons of our skins.
>
> . . . The illusions of separateness and alienation have been created only by enormous, exhausting efforts.[34]

Although the rejection of separateness reflects an Eastern philosophy, it finds some support in Western science. Accumulating evidence about the electrical signals sent out by the brain, telepathy, and extrasensory perception are indications that human beings do not stop at the boundaries of their skins.

Carl Sagan sees a commonality in all living forms, for nucleic acids are the basic genetic material of whales, trees, and men.[35]

Albert Einstein spent the latter half of his life searching for a unifying principle which would explain all of nature's forces. Although he searched alone and unsuccessfully, physicists have recently found that Einstein's fantasy may be true. Scientists have now discovered a "tiny, ephemeral" bit of matter which is neither mass nor charge, but a "force." Physicists call this force a gluon, because it literally glues on one sub-atomic particle to another. This sticky force, found within everything that exists, seems to keep the universe together. If true, Einstein was right--and so are all the philosophers, theologians, and fantasy writers who share his vision.[36]

Thus fiction and fact, philosophy and science, begin to merge into a new conception of communication in which unity rather than separateness is assumed.

Robert Heinlein, in Stranger in a Strange Land, explores the concept of oneness and the barriers to recognizing it.[37] A young earthman, who has learned the wisdom of the Martians, returns to earth to teach people

to "grok." This is the ultimate linking verb--meaning to enter into and become one with. Grokking occurs whenever the illusion of separateness is overcome. But many resist the stranger's wisdom, for they feel safer in their familiar illusion.

Madeleine L'Engle combines fantasy and science fiction in A Wind in the Door. This book chronicles the struggle of several children, a snake, and a cherubim to name and value all creatures and elements of the universe. They battle against the forces of nothingness, which gain power through the illusion of separateness. The process by which they overcome their isolation is kything (apparently a synonym for grokking). In L'Engle's words: "You might say that mental telepathy is the very beginning of learning to kythe. But the cherubic language is entirely kything--with you, with stars, with galaxies, with the salt in the ocean, the leaves of the trees." Kything, like communication, begins "like a small child's trying to pick out a melody on the piano with one finger, as against the harmony of a full orchestra [which is yet to be achieved]."[38]

May Sarton understands this philosophy of oneness in her poem "After a Train Journey." She writes:

> My eyes are full of rivers and trees tonight,
> The clear waters sprung in the green,
> The swan's neck flashing in sunlight,
> The trees laced dark, the tiny unknown flowers,
> Skies never still, shining and darkening the hours.
> How can I tell you all that I have been?
>
> My thoughts are rooted with the trees,
> My thoughts flow with the stream.
> They flow and are arrested as a frieze.
> How can I answer now or tell my dream,
> How tell you what is far and what is near?
> Only that river, tree and swan are here.

Even at the slow rising of the full moon,
That delicate disturber of the soul,
I am so drenched in rivers and in trees,
I cannot speak. I have nothing to tell,
Except that I must learn of this pure solitude
All that I am and might be, root and bone,
Flowing and still and beautiful and good,
Now I am almost earth and almost whole.[39]

Conclusion

To understand ourselves better, to welcome new ways of kinship, to perceive a larger unity: these are some of the visions that fantasy literature offers us. There are those who reject it as unreal. But possibly someone invented reality to dignify his own limitations. If we dare to imagine and wonder, we can create new realities which break through old limitations. By studying and performing the best fantasies, we can have the pre-experiences that will help us decide our own futures.

Notes

[1] Alvin Toffler, as quoted in Edward Cornish, The Study of the Future (Washington, D.C.: World Future Society, 1977), p. 182.

[2] Koestler on Creativity, BBC-TV, 1971.

[3] Harvey A. Katz, Patricia Warrick, and Martin Harry Greenberg, Introductory Psychology Through Science Fiction (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), p. 9.

[4] Pamela Sargent and James Gunn, in Science Fiction: Contemporary Mythology, ed. Patricia Warrick, Martin Harry Greenberg, and Joseph Olander (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), p. 155.

[5] A. A. Brill, ed., The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud (New York: The Modern Library, 1938).

[6] Max Lerner, Sixteen Ways to a New Lifestyle, Big Sur Recordings, 6970, 1971.

[7] Richard M. Restak, The Brain: The Last Frontier (Garden City, N.J.: Doubleday, 1979); National Geographic Special, IPBN, Des Moines, 4 Feb. 1980.

[8] George R. R. Martin, "The Second Kind of Loneliness," in Introductory Psychology Through Science Fiction, ed. Harvey A. Katz, Patricia Warrick, and Martin Harry Greenberg (Chicago: Rand McNally College Publishing Co., 1974), pp. 396-411.

[9] Philip K. Dick, "Frozen Journey," in The Best Science Fiction of the Year, ed. Terry Carr (New York: Pocket Books, 1981), pp. 97-116.

[10] Albert Ellis, Humanistic Psychotherapy: The Rational-Emotive Approach (New York: The Julian Press, 1973).

[11] B. F. Skinner, Verbal Behavior (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1957).

[12] Viktor Frankl, Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy (New York: Washington Square Press, 1963).

[13] John Knowles, A Separate Peace (New York: Bantam, 1959), p. 196.

[14] Jane Howard, Families (New York: Berkley Books, 1978), p. 3.

[15] Robert Silverberg, "A Happy Day in 2381," in Science Fiction: Contemporary Mythology, ed. Patricia Warrick, Martin Harry Greenberg, and Joseph Olander (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), pp. 379-392.

[16] John Varley, "Beatnik Bayou," in The Best Science Fiction of the Year, ed. Terry Carr (New York: Pocket Books, 1981), pp. 209-45.

[17] Robert Silverberg, Tower of Glass (New York: Bantam, 1970).

[18] Ursula K. Le Guin, "Nine Lives," in Introductory Psychology Through Science Fiction, ed. Harvey A. Katz, Patricia Warrick, and Martin Harry Greenberg (Chicago: Rand McNally College Publishing Co., 1977), pp. 159-82.

[19] Henry Kuttner, "Camouflage," in Human-Machines, ed. Thomas N. Scortia and George Zebrowski (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), pp. 119-61.

[20] Ray Bradbury, "I Sing the Body Electric," in I Sing the Body Electric (New York: Bantam, 1969), pp. 151-90.

[21] Arthur Herzog, Heat (New York: New American Library, 1977).

[22] Christmas Book 1981 (Dallas: Neiman-Marcus, 1981), n. pag.

[23] Antoine de Saint Exupéry, The Little Prince (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1943), pp. 86-87.

[24] Margery Williams, The Velveteen Rabbit (New York: Avon Books, 1975).

[25] William Faulkner, "A Speech of Acceptance Upon the Award of the Nobel Prize for Literature, in The Faulkner Reader (New York: Random House, 1954), p. 4.

[26] George Orwell, 1984 (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1949).

[27] Ray Bradbury, "Tomorrow's Child," in I Sing the Body Electric (New York: Bantam, 1969), pp. 30-48.

[28] André Malraux, Lazarus (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977), pp. 119-20.

[29] Jane Howard, as quoted in Irene Neves, "The Family is Alive, Well and Changing Like Crazy, Says Jane Howard," People, 6 Nov. 1978, p. 62.

[30] Stephen W. Littlejohn, Theories of Human Communication (Columbus: Charles E. Merrill, 1978); C. David Mortensen, Basic Readings in Communication Theory (New York: Harper and Row, 1973).

[31] Alan Watts, The Book: On the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), p. 14; see also Richard Taylor, With Heart and Mind (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973).

[32] Robert M. Pirsig, Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance (New York: Bantam, 1974).

[33] William Blake, as quoted in Jerry Hopkins and Danny Sugerman, No One Here Gets Out Alive (New York: Warner Books, 1980), p. 45.

[34] George Leonard, The Transformation (New York: Dell, 1972), pp. 8-11.

[35] Carl Sagan, Cosmos (New York: Random House, 1980), p. 273.

[36] "To Catch a Fleeting Gluon," Time, 10 Sept. 1979, p. 42.

[37] Robert A. Heinlein, Stranger in a Strange Land (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1961).

[38] Madeleine L'Engle, A Wind in the Door (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), pp. 96, 115.

[39] May Sarton, "After a Train Journey," in To Be Alone, ed. Joan Berg Victor (New York: Crown Publishers, 1974), p. 38.